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THE SEARCH FOR HEALTH

A Report from
The National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland

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Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a contagious viral infection that affects an estimated 30 million Americans. Each year as many as 500,000 new cases are believed to occur. The infection is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Two types of HSV can cause genital herpes: HSV type 2 and HSV type 1, which more commonly causes oral (on or near the mouth) herpes, known as fever blisters or cold sores, but can cause genital infections as well.

Most people who are infected with HSV never develop any symptoms. However, either type of virus can produce sores in and around the vaginal area, on the penis, and around the anal opening, buttocks, or thighs. Occasionally, sores also appear on other parts of the body that come into contact with HSV type 1 or 2.

Genital herpes infection is usually acquired by sexual contact with someone who has an outbreak of herpes sores. People with oral herpes can transmit the infection to the genital area of a partner during oral-genital sex. In some cases, herpes infections can be transmitted by a person who has no noticeable symptoms. It is unlikely that the virus can be spread by contact with an object such as a toilet seat.

When symptoms of a first (primary) episode occur, they usually appear within 2 to 10 days of exposure to the virus and last an average of 2 to 3 weeks. Within a few days, sores (lesions) appear on the penis, on the vulva or in the vagina, or around the anus. These small, red bumps, later develop into blisters or painful open sores. Over a period of days, the sores become crusted and then heal without scarring.

The sores of genital herpes in its active stage are usually visible to the naked eye. Several laboratory tests may be needed, however, to distinguish herpes sores from other infections.

During an active herpes episode, whether primary or recurrent, it is important to follow a few simple steps to speed healing and to avoid spreading the infection to other sites of the body or to other people:

—Keep the infected area clean and dry to prevent the development of secondary infections.

—Try to avoid touching the sores directly, and if unavoidable, wash hands afterwards.

—Avoid sexual contact from the first recognized symptoms until the sores are completely healed.

In 1982, acyclovir ointment was approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in persons suffering from an initial episode of genital herpes. Investigators at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and elsewhere subsequently studied the use of an oral form of acyclovir, which proved to be successful in treating persons with primary and recurrent episodes of genital herpes. The oral form of the drug can speed healing time and limit the severity of a herpes outbreak.

Researchers are looking for other antiviral drugs that may be effective against the herpes simplex virus. Although acyclovir is useful in managing herpes episodes, it does not cure the disease because it cannot kill the virus hidden in the nerve ganglion.

For most people, genital herpes is not a significant threat to their health. It rarely progresses to serious consequences, except in newborns or in people with suppressed immune systems such as AIDS patients. Although the fact that genital herpes can be a chronic condition may at first sound frightening, it is reassuring to know that the disease can be managed with proper counseling, treatment, and preventive measures.

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